



play outside!

## Getting Started: Ten Free or Inexpensive Ideas to Enrich Your Outdoor Learning Environment Today\*

1. **Plant a tree . . . or shrub or bush.** Your Cooperative Extension Agency or the US Forest Service may be able to help you locate free, native trees such as dogwood, longleaf pine, redbud, sassafras or native red cedar. Blueberries and oakleaf hydrangea are good choices for versatile bushes. A three foot tall fig tree (\$12) will double in size in one year and will provide a shady retreat where children can play while still in your sight. Fig leaves are very interesting. When the fruit matures, the children can harvest figs for cooking activities. Yummy!
2. **Hang a bird feeder . . . or two or three.** Use the area just outside the classroom window so children can watch the birds when they are playing inside, too. Birds are attracted to different kinds of seeds and food. Experiment and help the children discover various birds' preferences.
3. **Create a special place for digging.** Use existing dirt or buy soil from a nursery. Provide shovels, spoons, buckets and whatever accessories complement the play themes that children initiate. What might happen if you filled the dirt digging area with sand? A tarp will protect the digging area when it's not in use.
4. **Place a log outside the heavily trafficked area.** Children can use the log as a bench. Little scientists will discover captivating beetles under the bark. They can roll the log to find all sorts of interesting things underneath. They can observe changes as the log disintegrates over time.
5. **Designate a table or shelf as an outside discovery center.** This is an area where items collected during nature walks can be placed and studied. Collections of rocks, seeds, pine cones and leaves can be counted, sorted, sequenced and drawn. Encourage children to bring natural items to the center that have been collected from their homes and neighborhoods.
6. **Plant a cornfield.** (Think on a three-year-old scale.) Chart the growth of the stalks. Pumpkins planted under the shelter of the corn will thrive if the soil is good and rich. Imagine all the science and math the children will learn beginning with planting season through harvest. What fun to stand in the middle of the 'field' shaded by lush plants!
7. **Create a whiskey barrel herb garden.** Plant chives, rosemary, parsley, marjoram, lavender, bronze fennel and basil for a fragrant and edible garden that will attract beautiful butterflies. Cost? Whiskey barrel (\$20), soil (\$20), plants (\$15). Alternative enclosures could be cinder blocks, logs, a tire . . . Don't forget to water!
8. **Construct a rose arbor.** Okay, this one may take longer than a day to pull off but you may have a talented parent who would love to help. Imagine a shady, sweetly fragrant outdoor space with seating where children and adults can gather to play, read, dance, stage plays, or simply experience natural beauty . . . ahhh. A thornless climbing vine such as the Banksiae Rose will cover a wooden arbor in no time. The fragrance is incredible. Eventually, children will notice birds building nests in the arbor and imaginations will light up with possible uses for such an appealing outdoor space.

- 9. Plant a North Carolina heritage garden.** Okra and black-eyed peas do well together. Cabbage and turnips or a three sisters garden of beans, corn and squash would be fun to grow. Harvest and cook the vegetables. If you grow okra, harvest and cook the okra, but leave some to dry on the stalk. Watch them develop into beautiful striped seed pods that make wonderful rhythm instruments for small hands. When you are ready, take the dried pods apart to find the seeds. Plant them in the spring. Pods can also be used to create animal figures.
- 10. Inventory natural elements.** Take a walk with the children around your outdoor environment to document what you find. Use photographs, charts, tape recorders and dictation to record observations. Even toddlers can make bark rubbings. How many trees are on the playground? How many animals and what kinds of animals live there? What colors do you notice? Expand on the documentation by creating a list of what the children would like to see/do/smell/hear in their outdoor environment. This activity may lead to amazing transformations . . .

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**\*We've heard from administrators and teachers who value high quality outdoor environments and understand the importance of nature and exploration for the physical, emotional/social, and cognitive well-being of children. This document is intended to inspire those who are ready to make the leap and want a place to start.**

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